DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 403 CE 063 257

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TITLE Whose Development, Whose Needs? Distance Education Practice and Politics in the South Pacific.
PUB DATE Nov 92
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the World Conference of the International Council on Distance Education (16th, Bangkok, Thailand, November 8-13, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; Developing Nations; *Distance Education; Economic Development; Educational Needs; *Educational Policy; Educational Practices; Foreign Countries; *Human Resources; *Labor Force Development; Needs Assessment; Postsecondary Education; Secondary Education
IDENTIFIERS *South Pacific

ABSTRACT

The education that is being provided in the South Pacific, at a distance or in the classroom, reinforces a model of development in terms of which this region will never achieve fully "developed" status. This developing region has characteristics that render it unique. No member country shares its profile of economy, population, language, education, or colonial history with any other, and within each country diversity is also apparent. Distance education has not developed the region's major and still growing resource--people--for a number of reasons: the best of the region's human resources are being educated and trained outside the region; aid assistance to the region often comes under conditions that support development needs in the donor country rather than in the recipient; and political decisions and changing economic circumstances in the developed world always affect the region, but the reverse is never true. Distance education provides extended access and strengthens other institutions. In the Pacific region, the development and needs of these groups are being met: men, urban communities, those wishing to emigrate, donor countries, and the orthodox model of development. Overseas scholarship funding should be redirected out of the secondary school sector, out of all programs available in Pacific institutions, into programs that would be viable if students stayed in country, and into more awards that may be locally held. (YLB)

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Distance Education Practice and Politics in the South Pacific

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Bangkok, Thailand

8 - 13 November, 1992

CE063257

THE USP: SERVING COOK ISLANDS, FIJI, KIRIBATI, MARSHALL ISLANDS, NAURU, NIUE, SOLOMON ISLANDS, TOKELAU, TONGA, TUVALU, VANUATU AND WESTERN SAMOA

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Whose Development, Whose Needs?

Distance Education Practice and Politics in the South Pacific

'Whose development?' and 'Whose needs?' might appear to be simple questions. They enclose, however, many others and to few of these can simple answers be found.

Education for development as a sub-theme of this conference touches human lives in myriad ways, for the notion of 'development' is tied to or bound by culture, and inherent in culture lie not only our history but also geophysical phenomena and the realm of spiritual values. Development perceived primarily as economic growth, related to factors of labour and capital; perceived as an engine which education can fuel; defined mainly as the achievement of financial independence prescribes a theatre for development in which the ethos of dominant culture has assigned the roles and values for others. Development as we support it through education and training is a relative notion parading as an absolute. It justifies its own goals with its own definitions, as if the way the world is with its created economies reveals some evolutionary, natural truth about how the world should be.

For example, we talk now about the goal of 'sustainable development' as a new catch-phrase for good developing world assistance. Yet the subsistence economies of the pre-European Pacific clearly had provided sustainable development for thousands of years before (Thaman 1992, p.4). Rather than being a new phenomenon, sustainable development in some regions is a *lost* indigenous condition, having become uncompetitive only under new influence. While imperial aspirations supported by size and militarism may have brought subsistence economy regions into a world market-place, education and training have consolidated this locally by transmission of the values in introduced models. These models are provided not only in the education systems established after colonial and missionary incursions, but also in the educating of many young people in overseas institutions, and the on-going importation of expatriate personnel as advisers and consultants.

It is not my intention in making these observations to raise a nostalgic case for past idylls. It is intended, however, to raise the issues that the goals of development are culturally prescribed; that education is perhaps their most effective agent; that regardless of mode - formal or non-formal, in the classroom or at a distance - culture is what we *teach* overtly or implicitly; that the cultural values transmitted are generally those of the teacher or provider. When *distance* education in particular is the mode, and when the separation of teacher and learner is more than one of *physical* distance (to lie also in ethnic, linguistic, economic and historical traditions), then education for development raises even more serious issues.

In environmental developments, impact reports are now common requirements. In tourism developments, 'ecotourism' is now the catch-cry for achieving the industry's goals without damage to local integrity. Yet in the field of education, which is the conduit of active culture and a vehicle for social change, we are not required to consider the impact of what

we do. This seems anomalous given its powerful role and the fact that, ultimately, all human choice and action proceed from what we think we know or have been trained to value. No teaching or subject area is free of a world-view, a deep structure of intellectual referents which no amount of content-localising can effectively erase. An educational impact report would ideally address this issue as one of its items.

There should be two other items of a more practical nature. The first would be to examine the effects of one's distance education on the local providers within the community. Obviously this requires some research effort and interest in finding out who they are, what they are already offering or planning to develop in the short and long term. It should answer the questions 'Why?' and 'What more should we know than this group or that politician has told us?'

An impact report's third useful item would be a balance-analysis of advantage and disadvantage. I refer to the concern which some of us share about distance education's effects particularly *within* developing countries. Distance education - and especially when it comes relatively well-resourced with outside funding and expertise - can certainly open new and undreamt of opportunities. The poorer the country the more dramatic this opening will be. But dramatic also can be the social and economic divisions arising between communities targetted for access and others which are not.

In 'Distance Education and the Developing World', Guy (1991, p.157) summarises some crucial issues not yet well understood. In addition to 'the relationships between distance education itself and individuals, groups and social structures that make up society', he cites aptly among others, a lack of understanding of

- the effects of technology in the developing world;
- how distance students process materials, especially in a second language;
- the learning styles of developing world students;
- the cultural contexts in which distance education programmes are situated, and
- the role of distance education as a change agent.

It could be noted that, still inadequate as knowledge may be, there is perhaps more known about these issues within the developing regions themselves than outside them, and more known than is currently given credit for by some developed world educators. The 'publish or perish' syndrome is a western condition inseparable from individualism and competition as concepts.

These introductory observations are not directed only *outwards* to 'developed world' providers or even particularly to the international entrepreneurs. They are also relevant to the practices of Third World governments; to their national education policies, and to the policies of some aid donors. They are relevant also to The University of the South Pacific (USP), with its distance education mandate in twelve Pacific island states. In the education that we are providing, at a distance or in the classroom, we are reinforcing a

model of development in terms of which this region can never achieve fully 'developed' status.

The developing region of the south and central Pacific has vital statistics which render it unique. It is, in geographical terms, the largest of Third Worlds, spanning 33 million square km and four time zones. Within these vast expanses only 1.5 million people live. Covering an area (mostly water) three times larger than Europe, it is fully encircled by developed rim countries. It is, in terms of overseas development assistance, the most highly aided of all regions, with many of its island states now highly skilled, professional recipients (Luteru 1991, p.73).

No member country shares its profile of economy, population, language, education or colonial history with any other, and within each country diversity is also apparent. Within its four major ethnic groups - Melanesian, Micronesian, Polynesian and Indian - 265 distinct languages and 60 distinct cultures are still current. Its smallest country, Nauru, comprises only one atoll, its largest, Fiji, 95 islands (although it has hundreds more without habitation). National populations range from Tokelau's 1,600, to Fiji's 750,000, annual population growth rates from 3.9% in Kiribati to - 11.3% in Niue. Transportation systems between islands and countries range from canoe to 747s, communication systems from none to standard technology.

Many children still have no access to full secondary education although their national systems include post secondary institutions. Literacy rates are beginning to fall, and the quality of basic education is declining rather than rising. Economic independence as commonly measured is an unrealistic goal for many of its widely dispersed communities because of meagre natural resource endowment. Its GDPs per capita range from A$2,500 - A$450 a year (with phosphate - rich Nauru as an unenviable exception). Aid from its colonial donors is noticeably falling, but donor-multiplicity is on the increase.
The only major resource for development common within this vast region is human. Thus education and training have come to be regarded as key elements in the pursuit of decreased economic dependence, and governments' priorities move increasingly to the post-secondary sector. Thus the politics and practice of educational aid and the questions of 'whose development, whose needs' become critical in both national and international arenas, and especially in these entrepreneurial times.

In the south and central Pacific distance education has one major provider, The University of the South Pacific. USP is also the only regional provider in the senses of area coverage, collective ownership and indigenous location. As an educational type, USP is rare in the international community, being regional in the core components of its organisational structure : financial, physical, academic and political. USP is owned by twelve Pacific countries which, as proprietors, exercise its collective governance. The major part of its budget is provided by its owners, all but one of which have aid-dependent or augmented economies. USP maintains two campuses (Fiji and Western Samoa); three Complexes (Vanuatu, Tonga and Kiribati), ten in-country Extension Centres and six Institutes, all for the purposes of regional development. From inception the University was conceived as a dual-mode teacher, its founders clearly addressing three major factors:

- that, established to serve an area with a diameter one sixth of the earth's circumference, USP would need to 'spread itself' in new ways to reach much of its market;

- that much-needed higher education in many vital areas had to be sought outside of the region and as such was accessible to relatively few people;

- that the singular option of full-time internal study was not appropriate to the needs of a region in which existing education systems still 'amounted to variants of under-development' (Renwick *et al* 1991, p.1) and which generally, had 'a low capacity to provide for expenditure on higher education' (Aziz *et al* 1991, p.3). Distance education for bridging, part-time, and home-based study while retaining employment was the appropriate other response.

Despite the passage of 25 years, the growth of USP and 40 other post-secondary institutions, these conditions have not markedly changed. Difficulties are still evident at all levels of the twelve respective education systems. One country (one of the largest) has an estimated 700 teachers still working untrained in primary level schools. Their training needs include functional literacy and numeracy. It is common in the region still for teachers to have been educated only to the level at which they are teaching. For example, secondary teachers may have only secondary education while 60% of primary teachers have only primary education. Only one country (Fiji as the most 'developed') has managed to establish its *own* final year of high school. Even this in several aspects is struggling in its provisions and, like the two years of school preceding it, is not available to all. The University is still offering by distance education the two senior years of secondary schooling and the Form 7 programme on campus is likely to continue.

Education for human resource development *has* been widely undertaken and on a large scale by USP. In addition, the Fiji Institute of Technology, the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education, the National University of Samoa, Tonga's Centre for Community Development and Training, many Colleges of Advanced Education and specialist vocational schools have all been endeavouring to educate towards development. Generous assistance has been given through multiple forms of aid, yet as education providers we seem to bring development scarcely closer. Major personnel vacancies still exist in both the public and private sectors : for teachers and trainers in all fields (but especially in science and mathematics), for skilled professionals and technicians across the board. One might observe that we run to stay in the same place. One could go further, however, as the World Bank has recently done (1992), and suggest that we run in danger of going backwards.

Even if one takes as given that the south/central Pacific region can never become fully developed as the orthodox model would define this, one still might wonder why, with time and effort and money, education seems not to be winning in the field of HRD; why, in particular, distance education - with its far-flung net and open access policy - seems not to have developed the region's major (still growing) resource.

There are likely explanations and so possibly some solutions. This would be heartening to note if they did not so depend on political will and private agendas. It would be

heartening to note, if they were not so fraught with paradox : that the educational aid assistance on which the region depends is inadvertently undermining its own targetted objectives : human resource development and the development of education. Stated briefly, the three most likely explanations are:

- that the best of the region's human resources are being educated and trained outside the region in developed world institutions;

- that aid assistance to the region often comes under conditions which, in real terms, support development needs in the donor country rather than in the recipient;

- that political decisions and changing economic circumstances in the developed world which encircles us always impact upon the region, but that the reverse is never true.

That the best of the region's human resources are being taken or sent for training in rim country institutions is exemplified in 1991 statistics. In that year, USP's full-time internal roll was 2,664, its part-time distance enrolment 10,500 equating (under the formula) to 1,079 FTES. At the same time, records show (from only *six* of the twelve countries) that there were 1,800 students studying in Australia and New Zealand on scholarships; 1,300 also in these countries as private students; a further 500 in New Zealand on secondary school awards. Large but unaccountable numbers of others were studying in the United States and other developed countries. In summary, the known maximum of FTES at USP in 1991 was approximately 3,700 from twelve island states, while the known minimum in the rim, from only half of these, was approximately the same.

Two particular features could be additionally noted:

- that total enrolments as a proportion of the tertiary education age sector have been consistently *declining in the Pacific* since 1984, and

- that the numbers of internal enrolments in rim country institutions from the largest six countries (excluding Fiji) are now larger than their FTES numbers at USP in both modes. Internally, for example, in 1991 Vanuatu had 46 students at USP but at least 125 outside the region, Tonga 72 compared with at least 358, Western Samoa 113 compared with at least 292 (World Bank 1992).

These trends in internal enrolment are matched by a decline in distance enrolments in countries other than Fiji. (Distance education enrolments in 1992 are 15% lower than in 1989. Drops are most significant in Tonga and Western Samoa, whose share of the distance roll have fallen respectively from 15% - 7% and 14% - 5%.) Several member countries are now limiting or discouraging distance enrolment because major donors only directly support internal students.

As the scholarships offered for study in the donor's own country are vastly more expensive than those needed for study in the region, they are considered more prestigious and awarded to the best students. Colonial traditions and attitudes reinforce this perceived prestige. The effects of this shipping out of the most able human resources include

- the general undermining of institutional viability in both modes;

- the specific undermining of some programmes and planned developments in both modes. Forty-seven per cent of students on overseas scholarships are undertaking programmes available in the Pacific (Fairbairn 1992, p.40);

- difficulty for institutions in the region to achieve or maintain optimum standards;

- equipping students with knowledge/skills not always appropriate or relevant for their communities;

- wastage of training investment in that 60% of overseas educated students do not return their skills to their home countries. This relates sometimes to the difficulties of readaptation to local culture and economic conditions; sometimes (where students have not been fully funded) to becoming locked into the donor country workforce in order to repay loans. Tracer studies of post-secondary graduates, 1985 - 88, indicate losses equal to 35% of Fiji's skilled labour, 36% of Western Samoa's, and almost 40% of Tonga's;

- having to train many more students than are considered necessary, in order to make up for such losses;

- consolidation of the view that foreign training is better, as the less able students perform less creditably.

That aid assistance to the region often comes under conditions which, in real terms, support development needs in the donor country rather than in the recipient is evident to some extent in the scholarship award schemes. Approximately A$50 million of aid *to* the Pacific is currently being spent in rim country institutions, compared with A$23 million spent on education provided in the region. While some development benefits might accrue to the Pacific from that percentage of overseas trained students who do return home, financial development *always* accrues to the donor country through fees. It is interesting to note, also, that the $50 million supports fewer than 3,000 students, while the $23 million in the region supports at least 11,000. Little of this money in either context is directed towards distance education.

It would be true still to say that within the region itself, USP has no major competitor in distance education for formal qualifications. Some of the reasons for this, perhaps, could be altruistic. Others could relate to the massive practical problems in delivering and supporting programmes in this vast, sparsely populated area described by the Commonwealth of Learning as perhaps the most difficult in the world (Renwick *et al* 1991, p.43), and to the inability of students to pay more than minimal fees.

Even so, aid assistance in indirect ways is also hurting the region's distance education capability. Local expertise and services are in constant competition for distance projects and consultancies, and often we lose. Losers also, on occasion, are the island states themselves who, on bilateral aid, acquire schemes, advice and people inappropriate to their needs and of lesser quality than that which is locally available.

On occasion, USP has some opportunity to tender, but more often the deals are made bilaterally. Even when it does tender as a local institution, it seldom can compete despite longer experience, more relevant expertise (and so faster project execution); despite an established delivery infrastructure and lower tendering fees. The truth is that aid can create a highly unlevel playing field : one on which the principle of open competition, of the buyer's free choice to select the most suitable product, can founder on the politics of which team a donor will back. Thus a Polynesian police force is being trained at a distance by a university in Melbourne which seems not to need the business; a distance programme for training teachers in Melanesia is being designed from New South Wales. Thus a regional agency's officers might learn communication skills from Canada, and one member government has recently spent more on buying one distance programme from Australia (for 30 students) than its total contribution to the USP budget. USP will develop its much needed distance courses in Pacific agriculture without funding, however, because this adheres only to American personnel.

Another undesirable effect of educational aid is that which can result from its project or institutional basis : from piecemeal rather than macro or sectoral assistance. In the Pacific region, this is by no means donor fault. There still is no effective data collection on employment trends, no labour market monitoring system, no comprehensive data on education offered or needed. It still must be noted, however, that unco-ordinated and piecemeal assistance causes problems. For example, institutions in the region often find their limited budgets carrying heavy burdens from the on-going costs of short-term aided projects (Fairbairn 1992, pp. 9-10). As a different example, a USP distance programme for full-time students in Melanesia is being generously supported by a donor which is removing the programme's targetted student group under another of its own aid schemes.

That political decisions and changing economic conditions in the developed world encircling us always impact upon the region, but the reverse is never true is the one of the three explanations with no solution implicit in it. It may only be noted as a factor of instability for Third World distance education. Thus, downturns in the economy of a major donor country - leading to bilateral aid cuts for some of our member countries - can put families out of work, mean that students do not pay their fees, or even that the University's core budget is undersubscribed by some of its owners. In turn, staff posts and programme developments may be frozen. Likewise, a restructuring of education sector funding in another donor country can produce a dramatic increase in export entrepreneurship and in overseas student recruitment even by mission teams into our schools. Similarly, involvement in military conflict can cut a donor's aid budget part-way through a funded project.

For developing countries' governments, education's goals must be largely utilitarian : appropriate skills and sufficient numbers from limited investment. Distinctions which could be made between education and training serve little purpose if one cannot afford to make them. The Pacific's political leaders - its education masters - face rapidly expanding populations, declining health and nutrition profiles, the high mobility of an educated minority, and a developed world privatising or corporatising around them. To develop or not to develop is not really a matter of choice. This is true in two ways : the first is resource endowment; the other that, *either* way, one remains within a global system. Thus a Third World country develops whatever resources it has, if not in full hope of joining

the developed class, then at least in the hope of not becoming more disadvantaged. The island states of the Pacific, therefore, will doubtless continue striving for human resource development through educational endeavours.

This paper has identified some diverse effects of this, as gain in one sphere is counterbalanced by loss in another. This is not an argument in favour of doing nothing; it is rather a case for careful forward planning in which the compromises that are necessary have been weighed in advance for impact. Without this, general well-being cannot be served, and sectoral or political interests will drive development choices.

It will *always* be both necessary and desirable to send students to the developed world for highly specialised or high cost development. It does *not* make sense, however, to sponsor students away from programmes one is funding in one's own institutions. It is obviously attractive on a limited budget to acquire expertise from externally funded sources; it does not make sense, however, if the expertise is heavily context-based and does not transfer easily to one's own conditions. It is understandable and even desirable that a government seeks to develop its own higher education and training systems; it is not logical, however, if this is done by sacrificing access, equity and quality at basic education levels. It is reasonable that donors also should make gains from their benevolence, but it is not really benevolence if these *exceed* the beneficiary's. Moreover, it is not reasonable for a government to accept aid that is known to translate into downstream future losses.

The role of distance education likewise invites careful measure. It has in the Pacific region undeniably extended access, with 75,000 course enrolments at USP in the last ten years, compared with a maximum annual intake of 2,664 internally. It has achieved this deliberately by waiving formal admission qualifications for mature students and holding fees at 20% of the equivalent internal courses'. Although many students live in towns or larger villages, USP does also reach those on very distant atolls, who have only one boat visit a month, no electricity or telephones. As well as offering courses available on campus, the distance programme provides also the only regional courses in nutrition, law, preschool education, library studies, ESL and Pacific languages.

While the region's formal education systems have created a trained élite - less than 1% of the post-secondary cohort - the distance education programme has 'softened' the edges of this, by bridging many adult students into the select field. For these, distance studies are often the first or only chance of education at the senior secondary or tertiary level.

Distance education from the regional university increasingly is strengthening other institutions. It does this through the sale of sets of course materials (e.g. to the National University of Samoa); by accepting as USP distance enrolments complete classes of internal students in other institutions (e.g. in Kiribati), or through its distance courses' being components of other institutions' curricula.

Many of the region's senior civil servants, qualified professionals and political leaders are former USP students. While some will have come through a fully internal programme, many USP graduates have been dual-mode students, either beginning or completing their studies at a distance. For many, the distance mode can be their only way of beginning, as they qualify through it for admission to full-time study. It can often also be their only

means of ending, if employers need them back or they have fewer courses left to do than the full-time load required by scholarship agencies. While a Pacific education for Pacific decision-makers cannot always *guarantee* Pacific values and priorities, it at least provides for a nurturing of them.

On the debit side, however, we are educating mostly males (70% of distance students across the region, with % females in one country as low as 12%). It is possible that in extending access opportunities, distance education in some island states is actually entrenching further a gender inequality. This is *at least* as grave a concern in relation to future development as that noted earlier (about the inequities between communities which distance education can deepen). For Pacific Islands women, perhaps, we are dealing a double negative.

Another matter concerning some of us in the distance programme is the heavy predominance of Fiji students. Given that Fiji's population is half of the region's total, its majority enrolment is to be expected. But even its 65% share of distance students is only artificially held by a policy decision. From all other countries enrolments are falling, while in Fiji, the most developed, thousands are turned away each year. The cause to a large extent seems to be fees-related. Although relatively low by international standards, as a proportion of average incomes in ten of the twelve countries fees are a major deterrent. As each year they climb, the enrolment imbalance increases. It could be said that in educating for development, the distance programme has potential to deepen economic and workforce disparities within the region.

Overall then and in general terms, whose development and whose needs are being met in this Pacific Third World? Some answers could be those of

- men more than women;
- urban communities more than rural;
- those wishing to emigrate;
- donor countries and their own institutions;
- the orthodox model of development itself.

Some others, also true, could be those of

- post-secondary institutions, including USP (all of which are aid-assisted in some way);
- many sectors lacking sufficient skilled manpower;
- the many learners for whom full-time sponsored study is not practical or accessible;
- progress, albeit slow, towards job localisation and appropriate development.

These two groups of beneficiaries only uneasily co-exist, with many resources and efforts wasted in the tensions between them. In these last years of the decade this will have to be addressed if education for development is not to regress.

Some donors could assist in preventing regression by redirecting much of their overseas scholarship funding

- out of the secondary school sector entirely;
- out of all programmes available in Pacific institutions;
- into the programmes that would be viable if students stayed in country;
- into more awards that may be locally held and *extending* these to include part-time and distance study.

All donors could assist by allowing more project and consultancy aid to be used for local expertise where this is clearly available. The governments of the region could also help themselves by

- agreeing to the above changes (a not so simple recommendation);
- by monitoring their own labour markets in a systematic way, collecting data on trends, vacancies and requirements; by monitoring the work placements of their trainees and graduates;
- by not overlooking that the only sound basis for educational development occurs literally at basic levels, and
- by remaining aware that education is culture; that cultural vitality for new generations will not be preserved, in the drive towards development, if relegated to the fale or maneaba, to the gifts of yaqona or the salusalu.

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